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The War Fifty Years Ago

Fierce Battle at Wilson's Creek in Southwest Missouri. General Lyon Moves Out of Springfield With His 6,000 Troops to Attack Enemy Under McCulloch and Price Two or Three Times as Strong—Colonel Sigel's Force Routed Early in Fight—Lyon Killed While Urging His Men Forward—Command Devolves Upon Major Sturgis—Union Forces Withdraw to Springfield—Confederates Remain on Field—Result of Battle Saves Missouri to the Union.

By JAMES A. EDGERTON.

(Copyright by American Press Association, 1911.)

SECOND to Bull Run the battle of Wilson's Creek was the greatest fought in 1861. It was decisive in Missouri and sealed the decree that the state was to remain in the Union. These things made it important, but the death of General Nathaniel Lyon, the Union commander on that field, rendered it immortal.

After his return to Springfield from the fight at Dog Springs Lyon was in a desperate position. The time of

way, and these were without training or arms, hence were useless in the fight. The facts seem to be that of effective troops the Confederates had between two and three times as many as the Federals. Lyon had repeatedly asked for reinforcements from General John C. Fremont, then in command at St. Louis, but had asked in vain. In consequence he was far from confident of winning.

Sigel marched due south to strike the flank and rear of the enemy, and Lyon headed southwest to attack in front. Arriving while it was still dark, Lyon waited till dawn. He then surprised the Confederates preparing for

opened on him a murderous volley that sent his lines reeling in confusion.

Sigel's Division Routed.

The deception was caused by the color of the uniforms, which were nearly the same in portions of the two armies. It was also stated by the Federals that the enemy carried a Union flag until close enough to fire, when they ran up their own colors. Most of the authorities agree in this statement, some of them asserting that this ruse was resorted to twice by the Confederates that day. As it was a trick often practiced in border warfare, it is credible, although the Confederate accounts of the battle do not mention it. At any rate, this was the turning point against Sigel. He now sought to withdraw, but nearly all of his troops were ambushed and killed or captured, Sigel himself narrowly escaping. He saved only one gun, his cavalry, dragoons and a part of his infantry.

The sudden disaster to Sigel left the entire Confederate force free to attack Lyon. This was about 10 o'clock in the morning and shortly after Price had been beaten back. Fresh Confederate troops now moved to the attack, and Lyon ordered up the Second Kansas and two companies of the First Iowa to charge the enemy's line, which was partly concealed in the brush. The Union general already had been wounded twice, once in the foot and once on the head, and had his horse shot under him, but this did not



GENERAL NATHANIEL LYON, KILLED AT WILSON'S CREEK. FIRST UNION GENERAL TO FALL IN WAR—FILE OF STONES ON "BLOODY HILL" MARKING SPOT WHERE LYON FELL (FROM RECENT PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERTUS LOVE).

breakfast. Frying pans were hastily thrown aside for muskets. A flying picket warned General Price ("Old Pap"), who commanded the line where Lyon attacked.

Leading Lyon's advance was Captain Plummer's battalion of regular infantry, two companies of volunteers and Totten's battery. These struck Price's pickets about 4 o'clock in the morning. The Union forces at once formed in a skirmish line which advanced a mile and a half and pushed the Confederate skirmish line up the slope. A large force of Confederates was then seen on the hilltop, which was attacked by two regiments and Totten's battery and driven to the slope of the next hill.

Hot Fight in Cornfield.

Plummer's regulars became separated from the rest of the Union troops and crossed to the other side of the creek, where they suddenly faced a large body of Confederates in a cornfield. The fight here grew hot until one of the Union batteries, that under Du Bois, took position on a hill-top and opened so hot a fire on the enemy in the cornfield that Plummer was enabled to withdraw his men.

At this juncture the firing grew heavy at the other end of the line, where General Price attempted to turn Lyon's flank. The arrival of the Second Kansas frustrated this attempt, but Price's troops still charged several times only to be beaten back. Totten's Union battery had taken position on a nearby hill and helped to repulse the Confederates. This was one of the fiercest actions of the day, the firing becoming an unbroken roar.

An interval here ensued during which Price brought up fresh troops and started another attack all along the line. The Confederates charged many times and the lines reeled back and forth in a fierce struggle that lasted an hour. At this time Lyon's entire force was engaged. He had so few troops that he could spare none for a reserve. At last the Confederates temporarily gave way.

In the meantime Colonel Sigel had gained the rear of the enemy and began an attack from that side, driving in some scattering troops of the Confederates and following them for a long distance. At first he met little resistance. Sigel could hear the roar of Lyon's guns and expected the victorious Union troops soon to break through and join him. At this juncture General McCulloch's men advanced in considerable force, and Sigel thought them the Federal troops he had been anticipating. He therefore directed his men to withhold their fire until suddenly the supposed friends

deter him from personally leading this charge, swinging his hat and cheering on his men.

General Lyon's Death.

The charge succeeded in dislodging the foe and driving him back to the next ravine, but Lyon fell with a bullet in his left breast. Nathaniel Lyon was perhaps the most promising general developed on the Union side during the first year of the war. He was born in Connecticut in 1818, graduated at West Point, served with distinction in the Seminole and Mexican wars, was in the early troubles in Kansas, where he wrote vigorous articles for the newspapers, and at the beginning of the civil war was assigned to Missouri, where his career became one of increasing glory. It is not too much to say that General Lyon held Missouri in the Union and sealed the pact with his blood. His will left practically all his property, \$30,000, to the cause of his country. He died unmarried.

The death of the general did not end the battle. The chief command now devolved on Major Sturgis, who knew Lyon's plans and continued the fight on these lines. For a half hour longer the engagement continued, when the Confederates once more gave way. It was only a lull, however. Suddenly they reappeared along the entire front and for the first time began an effective assault from a battery. The fight once more became general, the Confederates attempting to turn the Union right flank and assaulting Totten's battery at the center. The Federal line now stood like a wall of steel. Several times the enemy charged forward almost to the muzzles of the guns and as often were driven back.

At last Major Sturgis decided that he had too few troops to try to hold the field and determined to retire to Springfield and thence to Rolla. The Confederates admit that they were "glad to see him go." Nor did they attempt pursuit.

Losses on Both Sides Heavy.

The battle had lasted till 11 o'clock and for the number of men engaged and the length of time consumed was one of the fiercest in the history of the war. According to the Annual Encyclopedia of that year, the losses were as follows: Union, 223 killed, 721 wounded and 292 missing; Confederates, 517 killed, about 800 wounded and 30 missing. The battle of Wilson's Creek was even bloodier than that of Bull Run, for at Bull Run the Union loss was only 9 per cent of those engaged, while at Wilson's Creek it was 15 per cent, and the Confederate loss was 10 per cent at Bull Run and 11 per cent at Wilson's Creek.



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